

## *China and the Rest of the world: a complexity theory analysis of world order transition*

Fulvio ATTINÀ\*

**Summary:** 1. Introduction 2. China and the chaos of order transition 3. IR models and the CST approach to the world order system 4. The policies-based order and multilateral policymaking 5. Westphalian, multipolar, multilateral: the world order claimed by China and the Rest of the world 6. China's hesitation on coalition building 7. Concluding remarks

### **1. Introduction**

For governments, not a few, who refuse to sanction Russia, the invasion of Ukraine pushes forward the change of the world order, a process they want to facilitate. However, the invasion is something of a headache even for these governments from which they would like to be spared. Without a doubt, Chinese leaders are severely affected by such headaches for various reasons and are aware of the complexity of going through the process of changing the world order. According to observers, a good number of states, the Rest of the world differing from Western states, are moving from delegitimizing and resisting the Western world order to forming an anti-Western coalition. They aim to replace the discredited order with an updated one suitable to meet expectations and needs that have not been met by the existing order. It is not obvious, however, that Chinese leaders believe that change in the world order system is ripe to come soon. On one hand, the world order is so in disarray that many feel that a new order will emerge from the current chaos. On the other hand, both the existing Western narrative of the world order – which presupposes that an order different from the current international order is mere dystopia – and the narrative of the Rest of the world – which presupposes as inevitable the turn towards a multipolar and multilateral order of sovereign states – do not address crucial issues such as which collective problems are the most urgent today to be addressed with rules and policies of world scale, and which institutions will have the legitimate authority to form those rules and policies and with what decision-making.

It is a common opinion that the world political order that emerged from the last two world wars entered the time that political scientists use to call the time of power transition<sup>1</sup>, the time of hegemony change<sup>2</sup>, and the time of the crisis of the liberal international order<sup>3</sup>. This essay deals with such issue and centers the analysis on China's agency and relations with the Rest of the world. The research approach is the systems analysis approach updated by the Complex Systems Theory (CST). IR scholars use to accommodate easily in their discipline the methods and research strategies of other sciences<sup>4</sup>

---

\* Emeritus Professor of Political Science, University of Catania.

<sup>1</sup> A. F. K. Organski, *World politics*, New York, 1968 (1<sup>st</sup> ed, 1958); R. Tammen, J. Kugler, and D. Lemke, *Foundations of Power Transition Theory*, in W.R. Thompson (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Empirical International Relations Theory*, Oxford, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, 1981; G. Modelski, *Long cycles of world leadership*, in W. R. Thompson (ed.), *Contending approaches to world system analysis*, London, 1983, p. 115ff.

<sup>3</sup> G.J. Ikenberry, *The end of liberal international order?*, in *International Affairs*, 94 (1)/2018, p. 7ff.

<sup>4</sup> O.Corry, *What's the point of being a discipline? Four disciplinary strategies and the future of International Relations*, in *Cooperation & Conflict*, p. 1ff.

such as social constructivism, role theory, relational theory to name a few. Surprisingly, only a few IR scholars<sup>5</sup> embraced CST although CST was born in the riverbed of General Systems Theory (GST) that eminent political scientists and IR scholars<sup>6</sup> praised as the research strategy capable of enhancing the scientific status of the discipline. Complexity theory is a plurality of schools that have in common concepts and ways to observe and understand interconnected systems of interactions between autonomous agents<sup>7</sup>. Compared to GST, the merit of CST is to prioritize adaptive change of systems organization as CST scholars theorize about open boundary systems.

The article is organized as follows. The first section illustrates China's current approach to the world order. The second section examines IR scholars' view of the world order and what the CST brings to the IR community to better understand the world order and the current transitional phase. The third section, based on the analysis of the previous section, treats the current world order as the first policy-based order in history. The fourth section explains the world order that emerges from the narrative shared by China and the states dissatisfied with the existing world order. Section five explains why the anti-Western coalition is slow to take place and China is slow to decide whether to lead that coalition. In the conclusions, issues for further research are highlighted, and the long road ahead to change the world order is highlighted.

## 2. China and the chaos of order transition

A few years ago, the Tsinghua University IR scholar Yan Xuetong (2021) argued that China “is now advancing to the stage of becoming strong [...] China also thinks of itself as a developing country – and rightly so, considering that its GDP per capita remains far behind those of advanced economies”<sup>8</sup>. Defining the country's identity based on the GDP per capita score is useful but not sufficient to place a country in the world order system. Indeed, Yan elaborates on China's position in the world order by examining additional data and facts.

In general, China has expressed dissatisfaction with world order institutions except the United Nations but has behaved as a member that commonly complies with the rules of world institutions. Of course, there are exceptions. In the UN Security Council and the General Assembly, China's position on Russia's violation of the integrity of Ukraine is the closest exception in time. On the other hand, China claims to be at the forefront of states that want to get rid of the Western order system. Especially in the current moment of order transition, Chinese leaders make us think they want to take the lead of that group of states but – this is the key to understanding China's strategy today – they want to help change the order system through a path-dependent process. The Chinese leaders, therefore, as we will see later, are aware that the transition of order is a situation well defined by the concept that in the CST has the name of deterministic chaos<sup>9</sup>.

Low GDP per capita and *becoming strong* are significant attributes of China's identity today, but China's interactions with other states in the current world order system are as significant as the above attributes. Yan admits that China “will not follow the United States' lead, and on some issues, competition with Washington will be inevitable”<sup>10</sup>. He points out China's advantage in some areas of

<sup>5</sup> A. Bousquet and S. Curtis Simon, *Complexity theory, systems thinking and international relations*, in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24(1)/ 2011, p. 43ff.; N. E. Harrison (ed.), *Complexity in world politics: concepts and methods of a new paradigm*, Albany, 2006; E. Kawalski (ed.), *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos. Reflections on Complexity and Global Life*, Albany, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> D. Easton, *The political system*, New York, 1953; M. Kaplan Morton, *System and Process in International Politics*, New York, 1956.

<sup>7</sup> D. Byrne, *Complexity theory and the social sciences. An introduction*, London, 1998; D. Byrne and G. Callaghan, *Complexity theory and the social sciences. The state of the art*, London, 2023; P. Cilliers Paul, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, London, 1998; E. Morin, *Restricted Complexity, General Complexity*, in C. Gershenson, D. Aerts and B. Edmonds (eds.), *Worldviews, Science and Us*, Singapore, 2007, p. 5ff.

<sup>8</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy*, in *Foreign Affairs*, 100 (4)/2021, pp. 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> N.K. Hayles, *Chaos and Order*, Chicago, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Becoming Strong*, cit., p. 42.

world-scale problems such as poverty reduction, trade, international infrastructure and development, digital payment systems, and 5G technologies. Furthermore, China is determined to reduce its dependence on world finance and trade policies to promote the use of the renminbi in foreign trade and investment to release its massive internal market from the country's vulnerability to outside economic pressure. Finally, Yan recalls that, to increase national security, China “seeks to turn the People's Liberation Army into a world-class fighting force ready for war at any moment, emphasizing quality over quantity”. Indeed, China wants to prevent threats to its core interests from the Western coalition countries. Yan recalls that “the risk of a conflict over Taiwan [...] is growing [...] Although China has not given up the principle of peaceful unification to date, it may abandon it if Taiwan announces de jure independence” Improving the country's military power serves to avoid being forced to give up plans to pursue national goals, increase its influence in the wider area of Asia, namely the Indo-Pacific, and also to be accepted as a primary agent of the order system.

On the other hand, Yan adds, China's leaders refrain from framing antagonism with the Western world order as “ideological expansionism”, i. e. exporting to other countries “its political system and governance model” for fear of hindering “their country's continued growth”. However, China maintains that the Western political values do not “have universal appeal and validity”. If democracy and freedom are universal values, “China defines them in terms of social security and economic development” rather than, the way Western political leaders do, “in terms of electoral politics and individual expression”

As a result, China is firm in contrasting the values and policies of the world order but, Yan admits, it refrains from derailing the world institutions and claims that it has not “the resources required of a true world leader, with globe-spanning responsibilities”. China recognizes that world institutions provide public goods and argues that *strong* states should provide resources for this goal while it is right that China keeps out of this responsibility because it is a developing country. But again, there are exceptions. China does not hold itself out of responsibility for supporting UN peacekeeping operations<sup>11</sup> and, to some extent, global climate policy<sup>12</sup>. In short, since the existing world institutions are the fundamental element of the Western policies-based order system, China juggles the chaos of order transition and, to facilitate the emergence of another order, mobilizes states dissatisfied with the existing one.

Building bilateral strategic partnerships with countries around the world, from the Balkans to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, is part of juggling with transition. Playing the politics of chaos is not an easy game for anyone, not even for China that praises world institutions, but since entering the post Mao Tse-tung era, it has never held back from delegitimizing their economic policies because they contradict the expectations of developing countries. If global problems are not addressed through world framework policies that national governments well or badly, in whole or in part, must implement, the costs are high for everyone. The decline of WTO trade policy leaves no doubt, even to China. Addressing COVID by closing the country had serious effects on the Chinese economy no less than the trade war with the United States and the consequent interactions with other countries, those of the EU in the first place. The same can be said about the other policies of the world order system. The Beijing's response to the war in Ukraine that contradicts the world security policy of Chapter VII of the UN Charter is a case in point. Indeed, playing the politics of chaos has expansive effects: it expands to many areas of problems due to agents' interactions and system interconnections. In fact, China's failure to disassociate itself from Russian military aggression provoked negative feedback from European countries and unprecedented interactions in the order system. The coveted policy of strategic autonomy, initially created to respond to Obama's pivot to Asia perceived as a threat to EU political interests and, later, to Trump's actions undermining European trade interests, turned into negative interactions with China under the doctrine of the *open strategic autonomy* applied to advanced technology products. At this early stage of transition,

---

<sup>11</sup> F. Attinà, *Traditional security issues*, in Wang Janwei and Song Weiqing (eds.), *China, The European Union, and the International Politics of Global Governance*, Houndmills, 2016, p. 175ff.

<sup>12</sup> Id., *China's and the Great GHG Emitters' Response to the World Climate Policy*, in F. Attinà and Yi Feng (eds.), *China and world politics in transition. How China transforms the world political order*, Cham, 2023, p. 57ff.

however, China does not dissociate itself from Russia and does not back down from playing the politics of chaos in agreement with developing countries.

### 3. IR models and the CST approach to the world order system

In traditional IR studies, the international order is the effect of concertation between great powers and, today, also coordination between global governors, namely transnational companies, epistemic communities, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent distrust in the unipolar capabilities of the United States, many IR scholars have argued that global governors bring order to the world by coordinating standards and rules on a global scale to govern many areas of international affairs, from humanitarian aid to the operation of the Internet<sup>13</sup>. However, the primary role of the states did not totally disappear from IR research agenda. Multipolar, shared leadership, and region-led order were the three models and research hypotheses IR scholars have most investigated. In the multipolar world model, established and newly emerged powers create their own circle of friendly states and challenge the existing order with a view to replacing it. The shared leadership model, proposed by Chinese scholars<sup>14</sup>, predicts that the United States and China share the leadership of the world order. The region-led model assumes that the process of regionalization, which has grown in recent decades, will continue to grow and undermine the ability of any great power to organize the world. Telò<sup>15</sup> argued that such a process will not fragment the world because regions will continue to share the rules and standards formed by international organizations that are of convenience to all. This argument recognizes the function of the worldwide multilateral institutions as the suppliers of public goods of a world range. It does not recognize, however, that such a function is made possible by the connection provided by transregional aggregates of states that share attachment to the existing world order system and views on the adaptation of the existing order to the changing world environment. The role of aggregates of states is recognized by IR scholars, even in the world of interconnected regional systems<sup>16</sup>, and is highlighted by the hegemonic order school that heralded many aspects of the current CST approach.

In IR models based on the methodology of systems analysis, international political systems of regional and world scale are equally functional: all of them have the function of addressing any problems of a political nature beyond state borders. There is a certain truth in this. Systems are the parts of a whole that scientists separate from each other to build knowledge “within the finite means of our comprehension. Knowledge and data-reduction are intertwined. We can have knowledge because we draw boundaries”, Cilliers observed citing the long tradition of epistemological thought from Descartes to Habermas<sup>17</sup>. The lesson of CST studies is that separating a system from the whole is a legitimate operation to understand that system only in that it is a set of interactions with an identity that distinguishes it from other systems. The identity of a set of interactions also establishes the boundaries of the system even if these are open boundaries since – in the CST approach – the interaction systems are interconnected and interpenetrate with each other, that is, they share elements and agents<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> R. Dominguez and R. Velasquez Flores, *Global governance*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias - International Studies*, 2018; T. G. Weiss and R. Wilkinson (eds.), *Global governance futures*, London, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?* in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2018, p. 1ff.

<sup>15</sup> M. Telò (ed.), *European Union and New Regionalism: Competing Regionalism and global governance in a post-hegemonic era*, London, 2016.

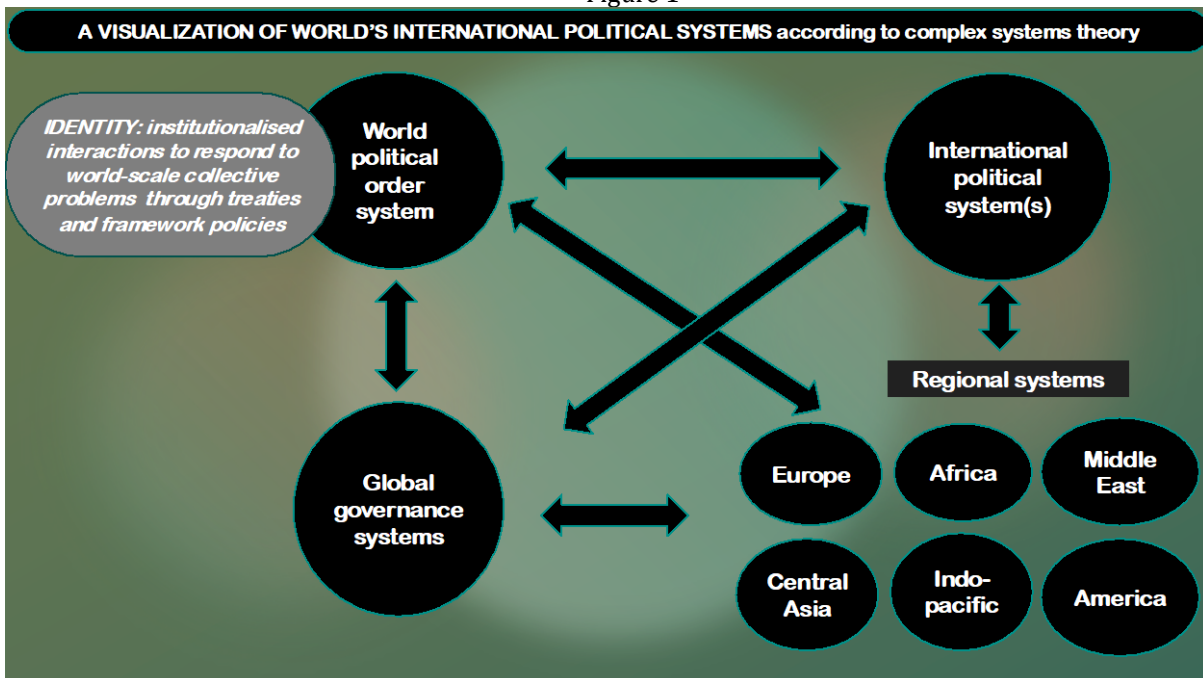
<sup>16</sup> W.R. Thompson et als., *Regions, Power, and Conflict. Constrained Capabilities, Hierarchy, and Rivalry*, Singapore, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> P. Cilliers, *Knowledge, limits and boundaries*, in *Futures*, 37/2005, p. 607.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 611.

In the present analysis, the nature of the identity of the system is the functional identity. Accordingly, the world order system is the system of interactions between states that have the function of addressing collective problems of a world scale by forming collective responses of a world range that states are called upon to implement with consistent domestic policies. This definition differentiates the world order system from other international systems of a world and local scale and draws functional boundaries that separate state interactions aimed at responding to collective problems of a world scale from all other state interactions. However, the world order system shares agents and elements with other systems due to the open boundaries that separate systems from each other in the CST perspective. Thus, there is interpenetration between the world political order system and other global and regional interstate systems and as well global governance systems involving non-state agents (Figure 1). In this article, however, the analysis deals only with the interactions between states and other elements of the world order system such as political institutions of a world range. Interconnections between the order system and other systems are left aside in the present analysis.

Figure 1



In all human societies, collective problems are addressed through responses that are made through politics within a system of specialized interactions, the political order system. A problem is a state of difficulty that hinders the control of the agents over the environment and drives them to respond according to their values, interests, and resources. When it comes to collective problems, that is, problems that severely affect all agents and are only effectively addressed if all agents give the same response or coordinated responses, the uncoordinated responses of the agents will collide with each other, and the collective problems will continue to hit with higher costs even for agents who are more resourceful and can deal with the problems on their own. Accordingly, political order systems emerge from the recognition of agents over the need of establishing a set of interactions to respond to collective problems in a stable way, that is, through institutions recognized by agents as having political authority over the function of producing collective responses. Normally, the agents respect the decisions of the political authority institutions either for reasons of expediency – since the decisions are appropriate to their interest – or for reasons of procedural legitimacy if the



decisions are made by respecting the previously agreed decision-making rules, or for fear of being sanctioned if agents do not comply with the decisions. Consequently, political order is based on hierarchy due to the superordinate position of political authority institutions. Scholars of international orders have provided evidence on the emergence and change of world order systems after a world war and the claim of the aggregate of war winning states to establish the political authority institutions<sup>19</sup>. On the one hand, history offers no knowledge about the other mechanisms for changing world order political systems than world war. On the other hand, it is known that the world order changes because some states unite to replace the existing system against the coalition that defends it. In the CST perspective, sovereign states that are dissatisfied with existing political responses to collective problems, aggregate to cause the emergence of the new order. The question of today is whether the emergence of the next order is destined to be the violent clash between aggregates of satisfied and dissatisfied states, as in the past, or can it take a different form.

To summarize, Figure 2 displays the CST concepts and their relationship that are of interest to the study of the world political order system and political systems in general. Political systems are systems of autonomous agents, self-organized (i.e. not organized by external agents), and open-boundaries systems, therefore interconnected with the other systems of their environment. As a result, they are adaptive systems because they adapt to changing interactions between autonomous agents and interconnections with their environment. Finally, they are evolutionary systems because the change of organization and order is produced by endogenous decision-making that makes use of both learning from the past (path dependence) and exploration and processing of new information that innovates the existing order. Incidentally, it must be borne in mind that open systems are networks of co-evolving systems because, through endogenous adaptation to changing internal and environmental conditions, complex systems also influence the evolution of the environment. On the other hand, how long the organization of a system persists is an elusive question since complex systems are constantly in an area of stability and instability, that is, on the verge of deterministic chaos<sup>20</sup> because decision-making is constantly powered by information to update the path dependence. For this reason, nonlinearity is inherent in system change. In human systems such as the world order system, information to change order is proposed, communicated, and discussed by aggregates of agents in the world public space. Order change narratives rely on information gathered from aggregates of dissatisfied agents to counter the narrative of the aggregate of agents supporting the persistence of the existing order. Therefore, the latter aggregate must update the existing order as a condition for keeping it active. This statement is significant for the coalition of Western states in the current transition of order, as mentioned later in this article. Additionally, it must be borne in mind that nonlinearity is inherent in complex systems also due to the occurrence of perturbations. These are changes in system practices that initially cause small effects that grow in importance over time and have a considerable influence when favorable conditions occur<sup>21</sup>. Reinalda pointed out the most important perturbation of world politics by recalling that "In 1815 the first formal IO, in the form of a river commission, was created, which among diplomats set in motion a thorny and widely followed learning process in multilateral negotiation"<sup>22</sup>. In the present paper, two perturbations are highlighted, the emergence of the policies-based world order and the multilateral decision-making of world policymaking institutions.

---

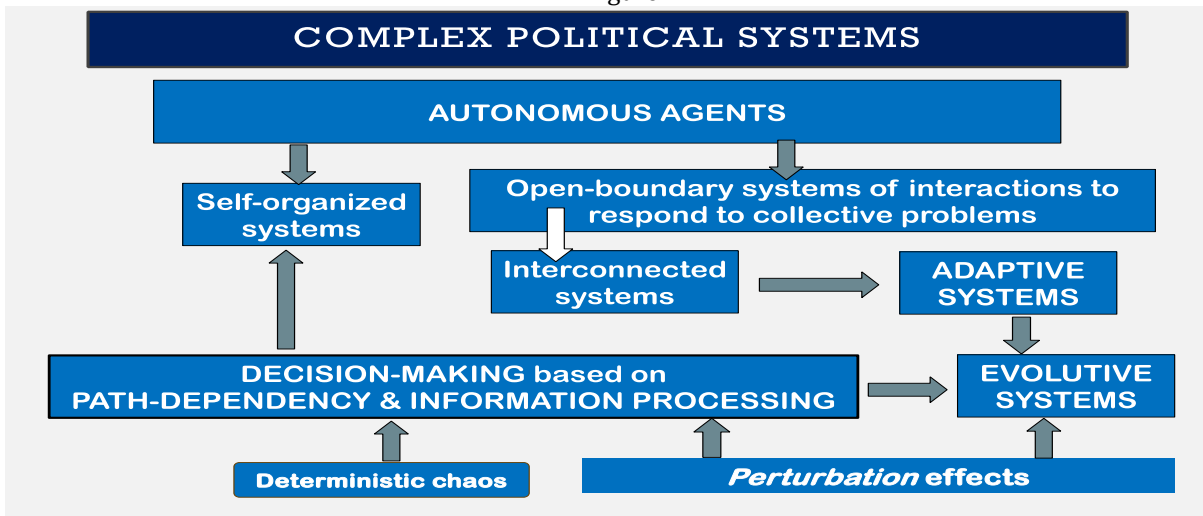
<sup>19</sup> B.F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: the Persistence of War in the Modern Age*, Oxford, 2019; R. Gilpin, *The Theory of Hegemonic War*, in R.L. Rotberg and T.K. Rabb (eds.), *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, Cambridge, 1988, pp.15-38; J.S. Levy, *Theories of General War*, in *World Politics*, 37(3)/ 1985, p. 344ff.; W.R. Thompson, *On global wars*, Columbia, 1988.

<sup>20</sup> N.K. Hayles, *Chaos and Order*, cit.

<sup>21</sup> The perturbations are known as the Lorenz butterfly effect, named after the mathematician and meteorologist who discovered them in the field of weather forecasting.

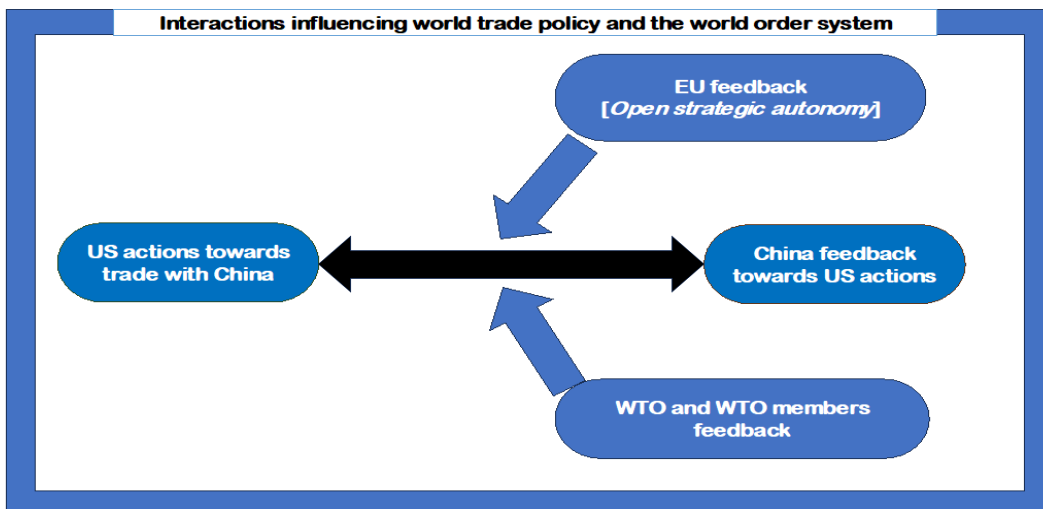
<sup>22</sup> B. Reinalda, *The History of International Organization(s)*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias - International Studies*, 2019, p. 6.

Figure 2



Last, attention is drawn to the meaning of interactions in complexity theory. Interactions are situations arising from reciprocal actions, hence chains of actions and feedback, between agents of a system. The action of agent A against agent B generates a situation of interactions to the extent that it provokes the feedback actions of other agents and elements of the system, including agent B. An example of interaction is that initiated by the action of the United States government against China in the field of trade. It has provoked feedback from the Chinese government and other states such as EU member states and WTO member states (Figure 3).

Figure 3



#### 4. The policies-based order and multilateral policymaking

This section examines the current phase of the world order transition involving interactions between existing and forming aggregates of states that have different preferences towards the

world order. In the remaining sections, focus is on how the transition phase affects China's policy towards changing order.

At the end of World War II, the Western states of the victorious war coalition acted to rebuild the world order on a different basis from the past. Under the leadership of the United States, they convened international conferences to agree on priority, world-scale problems to be addressed through collective policy responses. They also claimed to exercise the political authority of the order system through newly created international organizations to act as policymaking institutions equipped with specific decision-making procedures, i.e. multilateral decision-making. In the 1940s, the number of states was about 70<sup>23</sup>. The around 50 states, mostly European and American, who attended the Bretton-Woods, San Francisco, and Geneva conferences accepted the plan of the Western coalition giving life to the first policies-based world order system. Soviet Union and socialist countries refused to ratify the Bretton-Woods and Geneva agreements but did so at a later date.

The conferences gave priority to four world-scale problems, namely the preservation of peace and protection of the sovereignty and integrity of states from military aggression, the financial stability of the world economy, the prevention of trade wars through the reduction of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and the replacement of colonies with nation states although the nation-state was unknown form of state in many areas of the world. The problem was handled mainly by the colonial powers with partial involvement of the United Nations. The collective response to decolonization was inadequate and seriously affected the legitimacy of the world order system in subsequent times.

Western states offered resources to train the UN, IMF/WB, and GATT (later WTO) to form rules and policies through multilateral decision-making. All member governments accepted multilateralism as the valuable and appropriate mechanism for making world policies. Most of them also accepted that the multilateral decision-making rules of the IMF and the UN Security Council gave some states special decision-making rights, a choice that had delegitimizing effects on the world order. The equal decision-making rights of states are of great value for the legitimacy of the institutions and policies although both equal and non-equal decision making have flaws and strengths. The first, equal rights of decision-making, involves searching decisions suiting the interests of all states. Therefore, it is a process that can end with downward deals and increases the number of spoilers who prefer to derail the decision-making process if their interest is at risk and a package deal is not available. On the positive side, however, equal decision-making rights brings wider support for the decision and, hopefully, greater commitment to implementation by governments. In the case of special voting rights granted to some states, they may use those rights to protect their interests by reducing decision-making flexibility and the legitimacy of policymaking. On the other hand, states that have special voting rights may be willing to contribute resources to overcome the hesitation and obstacles of the states that oppose the policy. Indeed, the multilateral method must address the problem of collecting resources and distributing costs. In principle, the costs should be distributed in proportion to the financial capacity of each state and the benefits that each state derives from the policy. The assessment of the costs and benefits of a world policy is linked to what is called the policy paradigm, that is, the understanding of the nature and causes of the problem that participants in the multilateral decision-making process share. The definition of the policy paradigm is important because it predetermines the policy objectives and tools. To avoid continuous definitional debates, the policy paradigm is formed in the preliminary and formal early stages of the process by institution officials, national diplomats, and policy experts. The policy paradigm chosen is the one acceptable to all, rarely the first best. It could make the decision-making

---

<sup>23</sup> C.R. Butcher and R.D. Griffiths, *States and their international relations since 1816: introducing and version 2 of the International System(s) Dataset (ISD)*, in *International Interactions*, 46(2)/2020, p. 291ff.



process difficult and even hinder the final agreement if it contradicts the views of some states<sup>24</sup>. Finally, any multilateral decision-making process risks becoming complicated under conditions of uncertainty about the policy effects in participating states whose domestic conditions are different from those of other states and therefore have different views on the policy to be formed. The term ‘wicked problem’ has been coined to describe the problem that is not free from uncertainty about the effects of the response<sup>25</sup>. Whenever such conditions arise, the policymaking process could slow down, run aground, or end with a decision of low efficacy because the measures of uncertain effects are put aside.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the political regime of states affects the functioning of multilateral policymaking institutions. Democracies more than autocracies are inclined to form domestic policies consistent with world framework policies since in the former more than in the latter governments are not reluctant to coordinate public policies with those formed in agreement with external agents, including world institutions.

Based on the above, it is not surprising that criticism of multilateralism has increased over time and has grown in the current transition. However, multilateral decision-making has gone through a significant change from the years after World War II to the recent formation of world climate policy by the UNFCCC. Post-World War II institutions were largely ill-equipped to produce policies legitimized by equal decision-making rights of participating states. On the contrary, the decision-making process towards the problem of global warming has achieved the objective of legitimate multilateral decision-making by giving, like the GATT-WTO, equal rights to all participating countries and, unlike GATT-WTO and the other institutions, has implemented the circular model of multilateral decision-making<sup>26</sup>. As explained later in this article, in the CST perspective, the circular model of multilateral decision-making is a perturbation, i.e., a disruption of the existing multilateral practice theorized by Ruggie<sup>27</sup>. The 2015 Paris Agreement created the world climate warming policy as a framework world policy that state governments undertake to implement through consistent national laws and policies (Figure 4). States also agree that the UNFCCC has a responsibility to review how national governments implement policy by evaluating the five-year national reports compiled by each state government. In addition, with the agreement of the states, which is negotiated in the COPs, the periodic conferences of the parties, the UNFCCC reviews the policy and explores the possibilities of updating it. Although the war in Ukraine affected world climate policy, the Paris Agreement introduced significant adaptations of multilateral decision-making to current world conditions, namely the equal rights decision-making rules and the regular exploration of information based on feedback from states and non-state stakeholders. Finally, states that need assistance in implementing climate policy have the right to receive technical aid and financial means for capacity building from the UNFCCC and directly from states and other financial agencies.

---

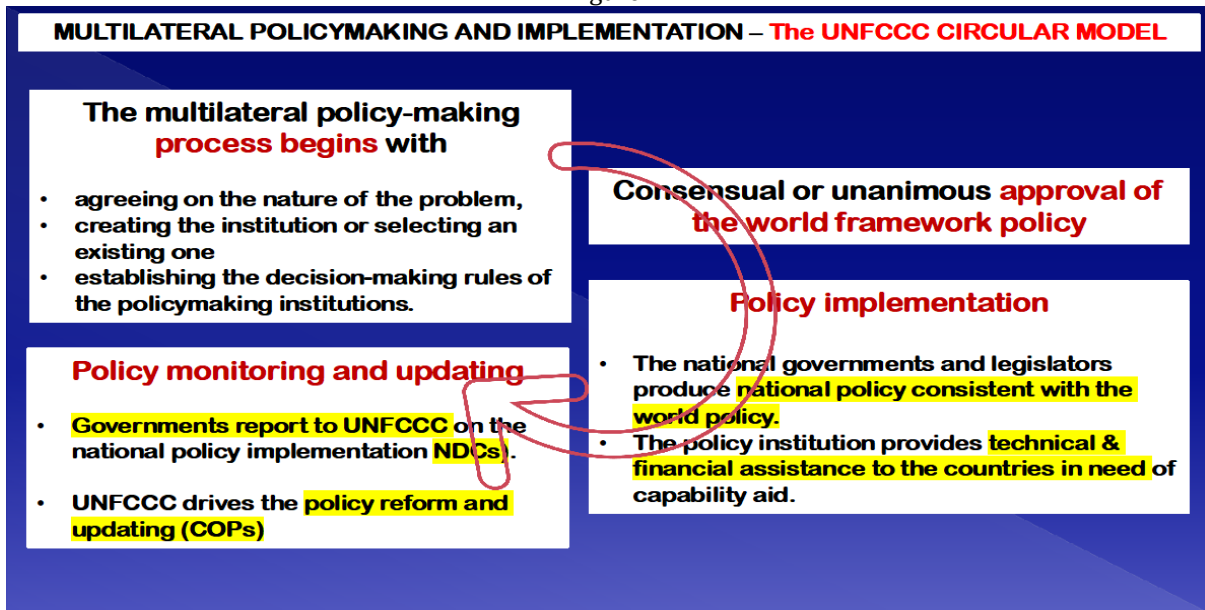
<sup>24</sup> K.P. Coleman et al., *Slow Progress on UN Rapid Deployment: The Pitfalls of Policy Paradigms in International Organizations*, in *International Studies Review*, 23/2021, p. 455ff.

<sup>25</sup> M. Carr and F. Lesniewska, *Internet of Things, cybersecurity and governing wicked problems: learning from climate change governance*, in *International Relations*, 34(3)/ 2020, p. 391ff.

<sup>26</sup> F. Attinà Fulvio, *World-scale problems and the policy response of multilateral institutions*, in G. Segell (ed.), *Development, Globalization, Global Values, and Security, Essays in Honor of Arno Tausch*, Cham, 2023, p. 77ff.

<sup>27</sup> J.G. Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism matters. The theory and praxis of an institutional form*, New York, 1993. It is worth noting that multilateralism is the name of many forms of international cooperation. Regular intergovernmental consultation, concerted actions of small groups and large coalitions, the negotiation of international treaties, and the actions of international organizations are examples of what the media and experts call multilateralism. All these are significant forms of international cooperation. They are different from one another and as well from what was named multilateralism at the time the post-war conferences.

Figure 4

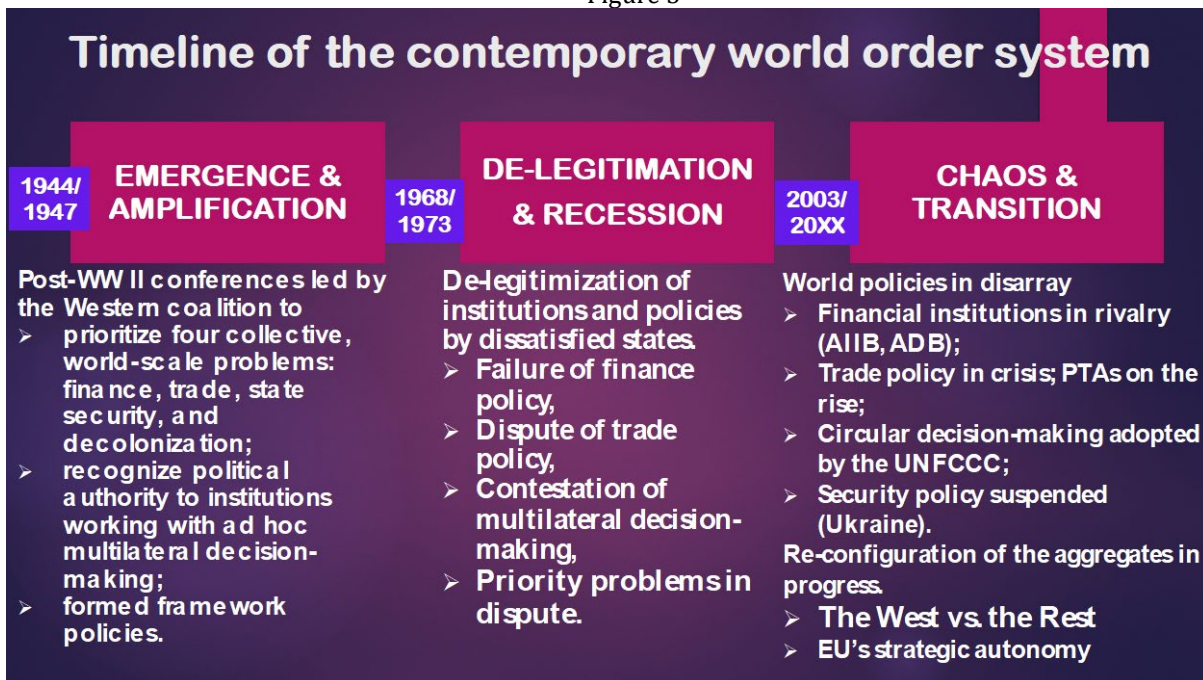


For all these reasons, the UNFCCC's circular policy-making model is better suited to respond to world collective problems than the policy-making models of institutions such as the IMF, the UN/SC, and even the WTO. These institutions lack mechanisms for regular updating the policies. The IMF and WTO carry out policy reviews only when serious disputes arise between states. Multilateralism is effective if the policymaking institutions, after forming framework policies through legitimate decision-making, monitor policy implementation by states, support the capabilities of states in need of assistance, and update policy when appropriate. Incidentally, the circular model is the way in which national public policies are formed and implemented by states in the national domain.

In short, the emergence of the post-World War II order is a turning point in world politics for at least three reasons: (1) political authority is exercised through international organizations acting as policymaking institutions; (2) the decision-making tool of such institutions, the multilateral process, is brand new in world politics; (3) world framework policies are the means of responding to priority collective problems whose implementation is entrusted to national governments. The turning point and the two perturbations of cooperative practice between states – policymaking institutions and multilateral decision-making – came into force thanks to the agency of the aggregate of Western countries and were accepted by most of the states existing at the time of its birth and by the states that entered the policymaking institutions later.

After the emergence and amplification phase of the order devised by the Western states, the world order system went into recession due to the dissatisfaction mostly of the governments of the Rest of the world against financial and trade policies. The world institutions encountered increasing difficulties in forming policies and updating the agenda of the order system. After the stage of delegitimization and recession, the world order fell into a state of chaos and transition (Figure 5). In this situation, the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted the transition of order, which was underway, because it also called into question the world policy towards military aggression against a state. Whether endangering one of the founding policies of the order was the unintended consequence of a special military operation launched for national and security reasons or the effect sought and disguised by the Russian rulers, the attack on Ukraine triggered the reconfiguration of coalitions that initiates the transition of the order system.

Figure 5



## 5. Westphalian, multipolar, multilateral: the world order claimed by China and the Rest of the world

Chinese leaders and the leaders of many countries of the rest of the world oppose the existing world order to be a system of institutions that protect the interests of Western countries. They also share a narrative about what a better order system should look like. In this narrative, the violation of state sovereignty is the priority problem of the world. However, they have not yet agreed on the institutions and policies that should replace the current system of order. China's leaders are at the forefront of formulating and spreading the narrative about the world order to come, and they want to lead the representation of the coalition of states that supports that narrative. But China is not alone in claiming the leadership of the anti-Western coalition representation. Other countries in the rest of the world claim this recognition. Furthermore, the group of dissatisfied states is not limited to developing states. It extends to oil-rich countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Understanding how this group evolves during the transition period and what agreement is possible between the states claiming to be the main representatives of the group clarifies the process of coalition reconfiguring that is significant for the emergence of the next world order. Let us first examine the narrative of the next world order shared by China and the Rest of the world, and, after that, the relations between the states claiming representation of that coalition in formation.

To be sure, at the initial stage in which the transition of the order system is today, neither the Western coalition is ready to revise the agenda of world problems and institutions, nor the dissatisfied states have drawn up a shared draft of priority problems of a world scale and a project of policymaking institutions and world policies. Changing the order system is not in the notebook of Western countries about what to do. The EU leaders only warn about the need to re-strengthening what they call the rules-based order<sup>28</sup>. The commitment to update the policy-based order and

<sup>28</sup> F. Attinà (ed.), *World Order Transition and the Atlantic Area. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Analysis*, Cham, 2021.

address the problem of multilateral decision-making – that is, equal decision-making rights to all states or special rights to some – have not yet been considered by the West and the Rest. In the West the mantra of the liberal international order is repeated without hesitation; in the Rest of the world, the leaders of the countries claiming representation of this group agree on three cornerstones of the next world order, state sovereignty as enshrined in the Westphalian Treaties, multipolarism, and multilateralism.

For the Chinese and the Rest of the world leaders, the priority problems of the world order are related to the observance of the Westphalian norm of state sovereignty. Consequent to *the coupling of sovereignty and the territorial state* enshrined by the Peace of Westphalia<sup>29</sup>, the international rules-based order must address the preservation of economic, political, and cultural autonomy and the territorial integrity of all states. Sovereignty is conceived as referring to the relationship between the state and the people on its territory in accordance with the independence and self-sufficiency of the state community. Such a conception of sovereignty hardly fits into the present times that are very different from the times of Westphalia because of the nature of world collective problems and the interdependence of states. Wendt recalled that “*the sovereign state is an ongoing accomplishment of practice, not a once-and-for-all creation of norms that somehow exist apart from practice*”<sup>30</sup>. The sovereignty of the state is embodied in historical realities<sup>31</sup>, and state governments must adapt sovereignty to the conditions of the time to provide goods and services to citizens and receive their loyalty.

Multipolarity is praised by the governments of the Rest of the world for removing hierarchy, at least the current one, from the world order system and getting rid of American hegemony and the supraordinate position of Western states. The narrative maintains that the primary advantages of the multipolar order is organizing the world by removing the norms, ideas, institutions, and policies that constitute the current hierarchical order and, therefore, promoting the equality and self-determination of all states. But this is not a spontaneous and automatic change because polarity is the asymmetric, that is, hierarchical, relationship between the pole state and the client states.

In the narrative of the Rest of the world, multilateralism is the valid tool to subvert the great powers' practice of organizing the world while ignoring the sovereignty of other states. But the narrative sidesteps the question of how multilateral institutions would function in connection with multipolarity, that is, in connection with asymmetric relations between each pole state and its client states. Because of the superior resources and leadership recognized by the client states, the pole states enjoy a *de facto* supraordinate position that they would not refrain from transforming into *de jure* supraordinate position in the multilateral institutions, that is, in special decision-making rights. As a result, the multilateral institutions of the multipolar order will not correspond better than the institutions that today assign special decision-making rights to a few states, such as the IMF and the UN Security Council.

China, Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa claim to be at the forefront of opposition to the Western order and to be representatives of the nascent anti-Western aggregation of states. The claim took shape after meetings in which the governments of China, Russia, India, and Brazil discussed economic and financial issues. In 2010, they decided to give stability to the group identified by the initials of their names, BRICS, when South Africa joined it. Since then, their reputation for being the front line of the Rest against the West has grown. In August 2023, they invited Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to join as members of the BRICS starting in January 2024. The expansion of the group to states, some of which

---

<sup>29</sup> E. Berg and S. Kursani, *Back to the Future: Attempts to Buy, Swap, and Annex Territories in Contemporary Sovereignty Practices*, in *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3/2023, p. 1ff.

<sup>30</sup> A. Wendt, *Anarchy is What States Make of It: the Social Construction of Power Politics*, in *International Organization*, 46(2)/ 1992, p. 413.

<sup>31</sup> R.E. Shinko (2010), *Sovereignty as a Problematic Conceptual Core*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias - International Studies*, 2010 (publ. on line 2017); H. Shinoda, *Re-Examining Sovereignty. From Classical Theory to the Global Age*, London, 2000.

do not belong to what is commonly called the Global South, reinforces the connotation of the BRICS as the front line of the aggregate opposing the world institutions and policies defended by Western states. However, so far, the members of BRICS are not such a cohesive group as to exercise collective leadership and thus the unitary representation of a coalition of the world order. They agree on the “unjust Western-dominated multilateral world in which they generally are underrepresented”<sup>32</sup> but continue to be divided on the strategy to remove the Western order system, not to say they have not gone beyond the stage of proposing the three cornerstones of the next world order that have been mentioned.

Economic growth, although uneven, is the recognized advantage of the Five, but it does not counteract the differences. The Chinese economy overwhelms the economies of the other four. But no one is ready to leave the leading role to any of them according to economic performance. In the future, the growing economic power of India<sup>33</sup> could change interactions within the group. On the other hand, all five countries share with most countries in the Rest of the world what has been called the dual process towards changing the world order “first, an emergence within the liberal order through an increase of their (primarily economic) material capabilities, and second, an ideational shift that leads to dismantling their transformative potential and their counter-hegemony of Third Worldism”<sup>34</sup>. China's dual process is evident in the financial sector. In addition to increasing its share in the IMF reserve and obtaining the corresponding decision-making rights, in 2016 China led the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to finance development projects in competition with the IMF and the World Bank.

Finally, it is worth noting that, since they share the aspiration to represent the aggregate of countries that oppose the Western order, the BRICS cannot harm the common aspiration by harming one of them. Accordingly, they refrain from isolating Russia so as not to endanger the construction of the anti-Western aggregate although, for not endangering the aggregate, they say that military aggression is to be condemned. In fact, aggression is dissonant from the rules of Westphalian sovereignty that coagulate states in the Rest of the world many of whom fear threats to their security.

## 6. China's hesitation on coalition building

Aggregates of agents are essential for the emergence and development of order systems of human societies. On the other hand, aggregates are conditioned by the autonomy of agents. Accordingly, the construction of order coalitions is conditioned by the sovereignty of states. Two aspects are highlighted here.

First, states enter an existing coalition or one in formation if they expect to gain benefits from the order in place or the one in preparation. The appeal of the coalition in preparation comes from the choice of priority collective problems and the design of policymaking institutions – both are worked out by the states that are or want to be coalition representatives. In the hypothesis that multilateral policymaking, introduced after World War II, and policy ownership by the individual state, introduced by the UNFCCC, will not be reversed, the decision-making model – that is, the equal or unequal decision-making rights of the members – and the circular policy model that has been described above – will be decisive for promoting new projects of world order.

---

<sup>32</sup> N. Duggan et als., *Introduction: 'The BRICS, Global Governance, and Challenges for South-South Cooperation in a Post-Western World'*, in *International Political Science Review*, 43( 4)/ 2021, p. 477.

<sup>33</sup> Y. Zeng, J. Kugler and R.L. Tammen, *A Chinese century: A stable or unstable world?*, in F. Attinà Fulvio and Yi Feng (eds.), *China and world politics in transition*, cit., p. 31ff.

<sup>34</sup> C. Efstathopoulos, *Southern middle powers and the liberal international order: The options for Brazil and South Africa*, in *International Journal*, 76(3)/ 2021, p. 387.



Secondly, a coalition is effective if sovereign states are loyal to the goals of the coalition and allocate resources to support the actions of the coalition. In this regard, if the states representing the coalition occupy the central position of the coalition, it is to be expected that the other states will position themselves in an inner or outer circle based on loyalty and the number of resources they commit to give to the coalition. This image draws attention to the importance that the coalition cohesion and the commitment of members have on the performance of a coalition. The results will be high only if most member states sit in the inner circle and have the same expectation of receiving benefits from the coalition's actions.

The process of reconfiguring coalitions is in a fluid initial state today. But some scholars argue that the gap between the West and the Rest, growing during the recession phase of the order, has already brought on the anti-western coalition. They support the argument with the empirical analysis of the actions by which, inside and outside the world institutions, the main countries of the Rest of the world oppose the existing world policies and try to replace them<sup>35</sup>. The evidence on the rising trend of the Rest is strong but more research is needed to confirm the formation of a viable and functioning coalition. On the one hand, the volatility of the foreign policy of many second-tier countries in such a coalition is the effect of domestic political conditions that affect the calculation of rulers for receiving assistance from this or that foreign state. On the other hand, it was mentioned earlier in this document, the states that claim representation and leadership of the coalition of the Rest of the world, are less close to each other on the project of the next world order than they want to appear to be.

Based on the above, China's restraint in leading the coalition-building process to change the world order is understandable. Is aware of this Yan Xuetong who, in the essay written before the War in Ukraine, proposed<sup>36</sup> to get out of the chaos through "issue-specific coalitions" believing that China and the United States can establish rival teams" to which the other states will decide "to join on a case-by-case basis, depending on which arrangement best serves their national interests". Yan admitted that "a club-based international system will bring complications of its own: a country that joins some coalitions led by Washington and others led by Beijing will be a less trustworthy partner for both powers. It could also become common for members of the same coalition to punish one another for actions required by their membership in other clubs". In other words, Yan recognized that in the transition of order the coalitions cannot be hidden under the carpet, regretted that "[s]uch conflicts are likely to heighten political instability" but he hoped that the "club-based international system" could go on because "[a]s long as individual states remain members of clubs on both sides of the divide, it will not be in their interest to throw in their lot with one side only. This bipolar configuration will cause some tension, but on the whole, it will be far less dangerous than all-out, Cold War-style competition". Finally, he admitted that in this "radically altered global landscape, in which unilateral decisions by Washington and the various alliances and issue-specific coalitions it leads will no longer be as viable as they once were".

After the start of the war in Ukraine, Yan<sup>37</sup> recognized the difficulties that the war caused to China and, therefore, the problems that it raised to the hypothesis of the *club-based international system*. The difficulties arise mainly from the fact that "Regardless of what China says or does in response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to wage war in Ukraine, Washington is unlikely to soften its strategy of containment toward Beijing. And as China's largest and most

---

<sup>35</sup> N. Barma Naazneen, G. Chiozza, E. Ratner, and S. Weber, *A World Without the West? Empirical Patterns and Theoretical Implications*, in *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2/2009, p. 577-596; N. Lees, *The Brandt Line after forty years: The more North-South relations change, the more they stay the same?*, in *Review of International Studies*, 47(1)/ 2021, p. 85ff.; D. Nurullayev and M. Papa, *Bloc Politics at the UN: How Other States Behave When the United States and China-Russia Disagree*, in *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3/2023, p. 1ff.; M. Papa, Z. Han, and F. O'Donnell, *The dynamics of informal institutions and counter-hegemony: introducing a BRICS Convergence Index*, in *European Journal of International Relations*, 2023, p. 1ff.; I. Roy, *Southern Multilateralism: Complementary Competition Vis-à-Vis the Liberal International Order*, in *Global Perspectives*, 3(1)/2022.

<sup>36</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Becoming Strong*, cit., pp. 46-47.

<sup>37</sup> Id., *China's Ukraine Conundrum. Why the War Necessitates a Balancing Act*, in *Foreign Affairs*, May2, 2022.

militarily capable neighbor, Russia is not a power that Beijing wishes to antagonize". On one hand, he did not exclude that Chinese benevolence towards Russia is connected to the coalition-building process of the transition of order and therefore argued that "Chinese policymakers have therefore sought to avoid unnecessarily provoking either rival power – abstaining from votes to condemn Russia in the UN General Assembly and carefully selecting its official statements about the war". He also admitted that "This balancing strategy is not without costs. Refusing to condemn Russia has strained China's relations with some of its neighbors and distanced Beijing from many developing nations that have lined up against Russia's war in Ukraine. It has also incurred economic costs stemming from Russia's war that could continue long into the future. Nonetheless, in order to minimize its strategic losses, China will likely hew to this middle path until the war in Ukraine is over".

Without a doubt, the war in Ukraine also challenges the policy of Western countries towards the transition of order. They are not comfortable with the chaos of transition and are not sure how to get out of it. The Western, mostly European, countries are rich and quite advanced-technology countries supporting the post-world war system of order almost in unison albeit transatlantic relations have been fluctuating since the Sixties. Over the past 20 years, EU foreign policy makers have been concerned about the instability of the world political order. The strategic documents drawn up under the direction of the High Representatives expressed the EU's awareness of the recession of the world order and the certainty that the order has now become multipolar. In 2016, EU's strategic autonomy entered the scene of troubled transatlantic relations by blaming the US for neglecting Europe. The war in Ukraine intervened to calm the dispute<sup>38</sup> and the matter of the dispute moved to economic relations with China. Strategic autonomy, designed for security, has been extended to the economy under the name "open strategic autonomy" to protect high-content digital productions in defiance of world trade policy.

## 7. Concluding remarks

This article called on the CST to grasp the theme of China in the current phase of the world order. It wanted to demonstrate that CST is of help to IR scholars to better understand how perturbations and decision-making based on path dependence and new information are conditioning the current phase of the world order. The conceptual and methodological tools of the CST, in addition, can help professionals avoid undesirable consequences from the chaos of transition.

The article highlighted how China is getting involved in the order's transition policy. The focus was mainly on the conditions for building a coalition of countries that share preferences for the next world order. Three areas of problems, among others, need to be properly examined on this topic. One area deals with the autonomy of agents, that is, the sovereignty of states; another area deals with collective agency, that is, aggregates or coalitions of states; the third deals with systems closely interconnected with the system of order. Unlike the traditional paradigm of sovereignty as the property of states separated by borders respected by all other states, complexity theory invites political scientists to frame state sovereignty as the property of states changing according to the conditions of the time and environment. Therefore, it is necessary to develop research on sovereignty as a practice consonant with the conditions of the current world. All governments must properly consider these conditions. So far, China and most countries are holding back from meeting this challenge. In principle, states aggregate according to their social conditions and the position they prefer to have in the world order system. In reality, states aggregate under the effect of opportunities and contingencies that determine participation in existing and potential coalitions. As

---

<sup>38</sup> F. Attinà, *The EU on the Road to Damascus: The War in Ukraine and the World Order in Transition*, in *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 22( 2)/2022, p. 115ff.

a result, scientists and practitioners, including Chinese leaders, need to delve into the conditions of order coalitions in the short and medium term. Finally, the interconnections with the environment systems, which have not been analyzed in this article, deserve consideration in accordance with the theory of complex systems. This article recalled that IR scholars have emphasized the rise of the global governance system and its overwhelming effect on the world order system. The theory of complex systems invites IR scholars to revise this perspective. It offers insights on how to develop knowledge about the interconnections between the order system and other systems of global reach.

---

### Abstract

*The article analyzes China's agency in the current world order system and China's interactions with the countries of the so-called Rest of the world. The analysis employs Complex Systems Theory (CST) updating existing political science knowledge on the subject under study. The world order is seen as the system of interactions between states and world political institutions to respond to problems of a global scale through world framework policies. The current world order has emerged from post-World War II conferences, has been increasingly delegitimized, and has entered a transitional mode in recent years. Building on CST knowledge about changing complex systems, the article analyzes how China and the states of the Rest of the world deal with the current transition of order. The analysis provides evidence of the current state of fluidity of the order transition and warns of the long road ahead as neither China and the Rest nor the Western coalition states are close to drafting the workable blueprint of the next order.*

**Keywords:** world political order, order transition, world order coalition, China, Rest of the world, complex systems theory

\*

*La prospettiva e i concetti della teoria dei sistemi complessi (CST) sono gli strumenti di analisi della politica cinese nell'attuale transizione del sistema di ordine mondiale e delle interazioni della Cina con i paesi, il cosiddetto Resto del mondo, che mirano a formare la coalizione antioccidentale. L'ordine mondiale è definito come il sistema delle interazioni con le quali gli stati e istituzioni politiche mondiali rispondono a problemi di scala mondiale con politiche quadro di raggio mondiale. L'attuale ordine mondiale, emerso dalle conferenze che hanno concluso la Seconda guerra mondiale, è stato delegittimato e recentemente è entrato nella modalità di transizione. Sulla base della conoscenza di come cambiano i sistemi sociali complessi, l'articolo osserva e analizza come la Cina e gli stati del resto del mondo affrontano l'attuale caos dell'ordine mondiale. L'analisi dimostra lo stato di fluidità dell'attuale transizione dell'ordine e avverte che la strada da percorrere è lunga poiché né la Cina e gli stati del Resto del mondo né gli stati della coalizione occidentale sono vicini alla definizione di un nuovo progetto di ordine politico mondiale.*

**Parole chiave:** ordine politico mondiale, transizione dell'ordine, coalizione dell'ordine mondiale, Cina, Resto del mondo, teoria dei sistemi complessi